A Fable of the Farmer and the Food Problem

NOW if ye think this food problem is bitin' into people ye're mistaken. Last spring I was plowin' down clover over in the back orchard along in the afternoon. About the middle o' June it was—a bright, warm day after a week of showers, an' everything was just jumpin' in the sun. I stopped on the top of the hill in the shadder of a big Nonesuch tree to rest the team. Ye kin see all over the farm, pretty near, from that hill, an' it cert'nly was a good sight. Everythin' fresh an' green, fur as ye could look. It made ye glad ye was alive, an' gladder still that ye wasn't grubbin' in some smelly office in the city. The air tasted like crabapple jelly, so cool an' sweet. The hull world seemed to be glad. Down under the hill the brook makes a little backset, an' there on top of a big cattail was a redwing blackbird hollerin' for somebody to see how good lookin' he was.

Away down stream the gray green oats an' the corn was crowdin' the fences. I c'ld hear Ben singin' as he follered the cultivator through the corn. The "medium red" I was turnin' under was big 'n' heavy an' just breakin' into bloom, an' a lot o' brood sows I'd turned out into it was tuckin' it ag'in ther ribs as if they was afeard they wouldn't git it all eat before night. Down by the ol' stone bridge the brook come wanderin' out from the dark o' the woods, an' ye c'ld hear it gurgle at the first kiss of the sun, an' then go singin' off down through the medder over the pebbles, happy as a girl that's just found out what she wanted to know.

"He Was a Queer Lookin' Bird."

It all kinda got me. I leant ag'in them plow handles an' says to myself: "The earth is the Lord's, an' the fullness thereof." I knowed a darn sight better, but I liked to think it was true, anyway. Feelin's is hell! Just then I see a tall, skinny feller leanin' over the wall, starin' at me. He was a queer lookin' bird. He had about three weeks' growth o' whiskers all over his face, an' a kinda wild expression in his eyes; ol' clo'es an' a hat that looked as if it had be'n run through a th- 'hin' machine. Bimeby he left off lookin' an' stood up straight. I see he was well over six foot. He didn't seem to pay no attention to me—jest pitched his ol' hat on the ground an' put his hands on his hips an' begun to draw big breaths, lookin' up into the sky as he done it.

"Gee, it takes all kinds," I says.

In the country, ye have to keep watch on the odd ducks that drifts along the road, becus it on'y takes one match to touch a barn off, but it takes a new mortgage to build it ag'in. So I left the team standin' in the furrer an' sa'ntered down to the wall. He kep' right on, breathin' in till he couldn't git any more air into him, then breathin' out, long and slow. I waited, an' bimeby he come over to the wall an' bowed, dignified an' old fashioned, a good deal like my gran'father. He says: "How do you do, sir? It's a beautiful day."

I see in a jiffy he wa'n't no common tramp. "It is so," I says: "guess I don't know you, do I? You're a stranger around Bascom's Bridge. What might your name be?"

"I'm a vegetable," he says, borin' right into me with them black eyes of his'n, that was sunk away back in his head. I noticed then how fearful thin he was. His clo'es hung on him like a scarecrow's.

"What was them stunts you was doin' just now?" I says.

"He answered solemn as you please: "Takin' my dinner."

"I don't see no leavin's," I says lookin' around; "nor no dishes." I see he wasn't right. "Dishes!" he says: "I should say not. Dishes was another curse of the old system. Humanity spent its time eatin' an' washin' dishes. Lord what a mess an' a clatter it was! The hull world was jest thinkin' of its stummick; an' the stummick wasn't anything but a agent of the food combines. First ye filled up the growlin' thing, an' then yer poor ol' system set to work to git rid of it. Thank God it's over."

"But what kinda food do you take?" I says. This feller, for all his shabby clo'es, talked as educated as a lawyer.

"Food," he says, an' kinda smiled. "I kin hardly remember what it's like, an' I feel a lot better."

"I'd like to hear more about this," I says; "if you got any way o' livin' without vittles they's two things I want to do, right off. I wanta git it on record fer the benefit of overcharged humanity, an' I wanta git to a real estate agent an' sell this farm before the news gits spread around. I ain't goin' to keep on growin' stuff if eatin' is goin' outa fashion."

"I have," he says, "an' I'm free. I used to be in bondage, first to my everlastin' stummick an' second to the highbinders that taxed me for vittles to keep it quiet. But I got 'em both outa business now, an' it's all so simple."

"Hold on, Mister," I says; "I got a little piece to plow yit, but you jest lay down here under the trees where it's cool till I finish this 'land,' an' we'll go up to the house where we kin talk this thing over."

I went back to my team an' started plowin' ag'in, an' the first bout I made I heard him snorin' like a ol' boar hog. The feller was all in, an' jest goin' on his nerve. I figgered he might be a mite touched, but he wa'n't no ignoramus, an' he wan't no tramp. It was plain as day he was a gentleman, an' in bad shape. Nobody like that is gonta wander away from my door if I know it.

Well, I finished off the 'land,' an' run the headland, an' it was gittin' along to chore time when I drove the team through the barway an' down the road where he was layin'. He was sleepin' sound an' quiet, but he sprung like a mushrat trap when I touched him. "Righto," he says, jumpin' up. But I see he was tremblin'. His nerves was all shot. I couldn't help thinkin' what a fine figger of a man he musta been before he got so ga'nt. We went along slow to the house, becus I c'ld see he wa'n't strong, an' kinda wavered as he walked. I turned the team over to Dutch Henry to put up, an' we went in the house. I set him down in a big easy chair an' asked him if he wouldn't like a cup o' tea, or mebbe a swaller of cider. We got some from last year that got froze, an' would put heart into a angleworm. He jest smiled.

"Thank ye," he says, "but I wouldn't know what to do with 'em. I ain't one of the 'Sophagi.'"

That was a new one fer me. "I guess I don't know about them there," I says, waitin' for him to answer. He set a long time starin' outa the winder, sayin' nothin'. I see his thoughts was away off somewheres. Bimeby he looked at me ag'in an' says: "It was funny to see sech a perfect system blow up the way she did. Jest like a toy balloon that's be'n overinflated; an' along come a feller with a pin. I'm the feller." "Jest what system do you mean?" I says.

How the System Worked.

"Vittles," says he. "Everybody was stuffed with 'em. Meat, an' more meat. It was jest a disease, an' folks got to feelin' the cold. The Food Trust passed ye over to the Coal Trust; that softened ye up fer the Clothin' Combine, an' between 'em they made ye ready fer the doctors; the doctors delivered ye to the Drug Trust, an' so on. They all had a whack at ye. That was what ye was for, an' when ye wore out the Coffin Trust took its bit, an' the Insurance Bund paid it's bet on ye, an' that was the end. I'll say it was some system."

"It's workin' pretty good yet, ain't it?" I asked him.

"Workin'?" he says, starin' at me; "nope, not no more; not sense I got my idee. I owed the System somethin' an' I paid it. It all come to me one day in the prison yard, when I was workin' on the stone pile. I laughed right out loud," he says, "an' kep' on laughin' till they was gonta take me over the wall—to th' insane ward.

"My God," he says, his black eyes flashin', "they put me in there fer stealin' bread. Bread, BREAD! Think of it, man—fer stealin' bread, when my Jimmy was layin' up there in that miserable tenement dyin' of hunger. Yes. Down in them city slums they call it 'neumony, 'r' consumption, 'r' anything they please, but I tell ye, that what they die of—them thousan's and thousan's of women an' little babies, is starvation, an' that's the truth.

"An'," he says, with a kinda hopeless look comin' in his face, "they wan't no escape. I seen the baby go, an' I seen my Jimmy go—an' I set there alone, after the wagon took Jimmy away, an' I says, 'God, ain't they enough of ground in your great world so's all of us kin eat?'

"I set there all night, thinkin', an' I eat the last of the bread I stole, an' in the mornin' the policeman come an' took me away."

"But how come ye put the crimp in this 'ere System?" I asked him; "I thought she was still goin' strong."

Living on Air Made Easy.

"Why," he says, "I got hold of a farm paper in the prison one day, an' it had two pieces into it. One told about the chemicles in vittles, an' the nitrogen makin' things grow; an' the other one says that plants just draws that nitrogen outa the air. I got thinkin' about it while I was breakin' stone, an' then it all come to me. That was the time I begun to laugh. It was all I c'ld do to keep from screechin'. But I kep' still after a while, an' when I got out I went around preachin' my doctrine. If ye c'ld git air enough, I told 'em, ye c'ld live without vittles.

"They said I was crazy, but I proved I wasn't. I jest stopped eatin', but I went along strong an' hearty, an' I ain't tasted vittles from that day to this. Then they begun to believe it. An' one day in a city hospital they had a poor cuss that was fetched in off 'n the street, an' had to be cut open."

With this he leaned away over an' stared into my face: "Wha'dye think they found?" he whispered.

"A deficit," I says, "fer a rough guess."

"It sure was," he says; the feller had be'n practicin' my system, an' he'd gone without food so long that his digestive apparatus had plumb disappeared, jest like the tail is gone, an' the little toe is goin'. Nature gits red of machinery that don't do no work." "An' be you the same way?" I says.

"Everybody's the same way now," he says; "the human race is gittin' red of its useless tools, the food shops an' profiteers is all bust, becus there ain't nobody that needs to eat—or kin eat—except in the 'Aesophagi.'"

"There they be ag'in. I don't think I git them 'Sophagi," I says.

"Why," he looked at me kinda surprised; "the 'Sophagi is the folks that had all the money an' c'ld afford to buy vittles. An' they kep' on stuffin' 'emselves, while the common people was learnin' to live on air, that didn't cost nothin'. The 'Sophagi is the few remainin' folk that's got ol' fashioned insides. They're piped fer vittles. They're jest the moneyed aristocracy. What with the cussed combines they financed they put food so high nobody that was worth under seven figgers could git it without stealin'. Now they got it all to themselves, an' welcome. The rest of us kin take a few deep breaths every day an' never git dyspepsy.

"That clears up a mystery fer me, my friend," I says; "I be'n wonderin' for quite a while what it was that kep' farm business on the bum. Now I know. There ain't nobody eatin' anything."

"An' it ain't on'y the farm business," he says; "it's the dish factories, 'n' the tin mills, 'n' cook stove foundries, 'n' docks, 'n' shippin', 'n' railroads. It's changed everything. I guess maybe they'll see now that they overdone it. They killed the goose that laid the golden egg. Fer a generation or two they'll have a fine time stuffin' themselves, an' then they'll have to peter out from intermarriage becus there won't be no more plebeian blood to keep 'em up to health an' stren'th. We're a different race now." "Well," I says, "you cert'n'y done the job up brown."

He puckered up his forehead an' says, "There's the trouble. There was jest one thing I overlooked, an' that's what they call the directive intelligence of capital."

"How's that?" I asked him.

"Why," he says, "jest as soon as they found out that the people was gittin' so's they could live on nitrogen outa the air, they sent down to Washin'ton an' got Congress to give 'em control of the air. One day I was goin' along an' a policeman stopped me an' he says, 'Leme see yer air receipt.' I didn't know what he meant, but I found out. They got a law that compels every man an' woman to pay a air tax to the Consolidated Nitrogen Company, Limited. Once a year ye go to the headquarters an' git yer chest expansion measured to show how much air you'll use in a year, an' ye pay fer it by the thousan' cubic feet, just the same as gas, on'y this don't cost 'em notin' except buyin' legislaters an' the profits is a lot bigger."

"But what if ye don't pay it?" says I.

"If ye don't pay," he says—"why, if ye don't pay it, ye go straight to hell. They jest shut ye up in a tight room an' draw the air all out of it, till it's a vacuum. In a few minutes the air rates don't make no difference to ye at all. The reason I come out here is that the company ain't got established yet, on'y in the cities, where they's more folks an' less air an' they kin git the money quicker. An' I wanted to git where I kin think. I got kinda muddled tryin' to figger out how to beat this thing."

"What kinda luck be ye havin'?" I says; "d'ye think ye kin beat it? It looks like a tough proposition fer folks that can't afford to git to the country."

Broth Is Fine Medicine.

"It is too," he says; "I thought I done somethin' when I found a way to stop the food combines, but I might of knowed that the minute anything got to be a necessity to the majority it'd git cornered an' have a high fence built around it an' a back breakin' price put onto it, with the Gov'ment backin' the play."

"But," I says, "what's the matter with organizing the people an' tacklin' this thing politically?"

He jest looked at me kinda pityin', an' says: "Oh, hell, be you crazy?"

"One of us is," I says, "an I'll be durned if I know whether it's you 'r' me."

He didn't say nothin', an' pretty soon his head begun to fall down on' his chest. In a few minutes he was sound asleep, jest from exhaustion. After a while I roused him up an' jollied him into gittin' into bed, 'n' then I went out into the kitchen. "Ma," I says, "I want ye to heat me up a plate o' that marrer bone soup. I'm gonta put it where them damn 'Sophagi can't git it."

"Joshuay," she says, "be you crazy?"

"I guess I be," I says: "you're the secon' one that's asked me that to-day, an' I'm beginnin' to feel funny." But she made the soup, an' I took it in an' set it on the table by the bed. I says to him, speakin' kinda low an' mysterious, 'Now, looka here; we got a little food left, an' we're tryin' to git red of it before the 'Sophagi or their fat butlers kin git holt of it. It you want a good joke on them you git outside o' this 'ere broth. After what they done to you ye hadn't oughta let 'em git it.'"

He hung fire a minute, but I put the soup under his nose, an' y'oughta seen him reach fer the spoon. The plateful jest disappeared like a drop o' water on the kitchen stove.

"I dunno," he says as he was wipin' his mouth. "Mebbe I'd 'a' done jest as well to let 'em keep on eatin'. They's some advantages into it."

With that he went to sleep like a shot. I went out an' cranked up the flivver an' scooted down for Doc Nutall.

Doc looked the feller over, an' he says to me: "Josh, all the medicine this rooster needs is beef an' sleep. I guess he's come to the right place." An' he grinned. "Well, Doc," I says, "sleep don't cost nothin', an' I can't git but about fourteen cents a pound fer that two year ol' steer we butchered yistiddy. Mebbe I kin afford to fix him up."

[This is the fifth and last article of a series on The Farmers' Side of It.]

Gerald Beaumont, author of "Riders Up" and "What Are the Great Racehorse Stories and Why" that appeared in our issue of December 10, has been spending considerable time in the vicinity of Tia Juana, across the Mexican border, south of San Diego.

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The Putnams announce for publication in February "The Barb," by William J. McNally, a novel of college life. Unlike most books with a collegiate background, this one deals with a coeducational State university. The title refers to the term "barbarian," which is the college name for the non-fraternity man.